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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001830

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/21/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: SNAPSHOTS FROM TRINCOMALEE

Classified By: POL PATRICIA MAHONEY. Reason: 1.4(B,D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: On October 19, the Ambassador traveled to the eastern district of Trincomalee for a series of meetings with the Sri Lankan Army (SLA), Trincomalee Government Agent (GA) K.G. Leelananda, Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) and an NGO roundtable hosted by USAID. Interlocutors said the security situation remains tense in Trincomalee with frequent grenade attacks on military sentry posts, most resulting in little or no damage. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) continues to recruit children. The Tamil population is cooperative with the police but deeply distrustful of the SLA and its sometimes heavy-handed tactics according to the SLMM. Post-Tsunami reconstruction is painfully slow with only 29 of the needed 6000 permanent housing units completed. Interlocutors reported a comparative lack of interest in the race among local voters. Authorities are expecting a 60% voter turn out and are arranging to assist up to 20,000 Tamils in crossing from LTTE-controlled territory to government controlled polling stations. END SUMMARY.

WHY CAN'T WE BE FRIENDS?

12. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by POLOFF, DATT and ARSO visited Trincomalee district on October 19 and met with a variety of military, government and NGO officials. The district is almost evenly divided between the Muslim, Tamil and Sinhala populations, with Tamils a 68 per cent majority within the town limits. The SLA maintains a highly visible security presence, with soldiers in full body armor. This summer brought an increase in "grenade" attacks on security checkpoints. Arthur Tveiten, head of the local SLMM office, opined that a lack of casualties or even shrapnel damage after the attacks points to improvised explosive devices rather than proper military hand grenades. The commanding general of the 22nd infantry division reported only one death in over 30 grenade attacks over the last three months. The SLA suspects that hastily trained irregulars, rather than LTTE cadres, were conducting most of the attacks. Following such an attack, the SLA will deploy to an area and conduct house to house searches. The SLMM believes that these searches often continue a week to ten days after the attack, intimidating the Tamil population as a form of punishment. According to the SLA, 78 cases of child recruitment were reported in the last three months. INGO representatives agreed that the LTTE continues to recruit or coerce minors into their ranks. All parties agree that the majority of incidents go unreported. NGOs involved in housing complained that the commanding general of Trincomalee had created burdensome paperwork and inspection procedures to obstruct construction material from going to the uncleared areas.

HERE COMES THE RAIN AGAIN

13. (SBU) Trincomalee has a need for 6000 permanent houses, of which, GA Leelananda reported, ground has broken on 600. The UNHCR said that of those 600, only 29 are completed. Leelananda admitted that, although slow getting off the mark, his office now had MOUs signed with donor organizations and was expecting housing construction to accelerate. The GA has identified six transitional housing zones as vulnerable to monsoon flooding and is ready to handle their evacuation if necessary. Housing for Life, a USAID partner organization, reports that transitional housing design and construction in the district vary in ability to withstand monsoon rains. Houses range from having a concrete slab four inches above the ground to a three foot foundation wall capable of withstanding several days of rain. The GA said he learned of the new coastal buffer zone regulations through the newspaper. To date, he has not received details or guidance from Colombo. There is much confusion among the displaced over the new policy, according to the INGOs. In a positive development, the UNHCR reported that the GSL and some NGOs were ready to support getting conflict internally displaced persons (CIDPs) into permanent houses. This change will improve the lives of most people living in two major welfare centers for IDPs and could result in the closure of those centers in the future.

BULLETS OR BALLOTS

14. (SBU) The November 17 presidential election raises many challenges for the authorities in Trincomalee. Leelananda is

predicting a 60 per cent voter turnout. This includes an estimated 20,000 Tamils coming from LTTE-controlled areas to exercise their right. To accommodate the voters coming from LTTE territory, the GA has arranged bus transportation to shuttle the voters to 100 polling stations. Since Trincomalee is always at the point of boiling over, according to Leelananda, the police and armed forces have established a joint security plan to suppress election violence. Oddly, despite the high level of interest in Colombo, both the NGOs and the GA have said there is little talk of elections among the general population. LTTE political head Thamilchelvan's comment that neither southern Sinhalese Buddhist candidate can address the needs of the Tamil people may minimize Tamil voter turnout.

#### COMMENT

15. (C) While spared the daily killings of the shadow war in adjoining Batticaloa district, Trincomalee remains a coiled spring. The armed forces appear to have the situation in hand, but mistrust of the Sinhalese soldiers persists among Tamil residents. Having made the right decision in relaxing the coastal buffer zone requirements, the GSL should act quickly to ensure officials in the affected areas - like the GA in Trincomalee - are given adequate guidelines for implementation. The Ambassador raised the issue of ensuring voters from uncleared areas would be able to vote with both the GA and the SLA commander and received assurances from both. This could be an important factor in what looks like a close election.

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